

Teenage Foster Children: Placement Disruptions

Practice Evaluation Project

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Abstract

An MSW student intern for social services that relate to foster care placements in a medium size county in a rural region observed that teenage children are more likely to experience a disruption in placement while in foster care. MSW intern explored potential causes for these disruptions by reviewing twenty case files of teenage foster children that had experienced placement disruptions to observe causation for disruption. After review it was found that common causes included, but were not limited to behaviors displayed by the child, mental health concerns and the need for a higher skill level of care. Other placements were disrupted due to factors unrelated to the juvenile experiencing disruption.

Practice Evaluation Project

Introduction:

All children in a foster care system may experience a disruption in their foster care placement regardless of age. While all children have the potential to disrupt it are teenagers and older children that experience the higher number of disruptions in their foster care experience. This concern has been identified as a concern by the rural, regional level social services administration; however, no research had been conducted to attempt to determine causation for disruptions in this age bracket. It is important that these children in this population receive the care and attention that all children deserve. Disruptions in placement may have a tremendous effect on the child. Disruptions may lead to lower self-esteem, trust issues and poor relationship skills for the children that experience the disruptions. The events that occur in these years have a direct effect on the child's ability to function in the future in the adult world.

There have been limited studies completed in attempting to identify the causes of placement disruptions of teenage children in foster care. However, there have been several studies that relate to the interests and needs of teenage children in the foster care system. One study identified that the increased emotional levels of a teenage child is magnified by the foster care experience (Lipscombe, Farmer, & Moyers, 2003). The article focused on parenting techniques that foster parents may utilize in managing the behavior of the foster child. Items such as support groups were theorized to be helpful in reducing stress among foster parents. Another study utilized interviewing a small number of young adults that had been in foster care while they were in their teenage years. The study focused primarily on the emotions of these previous foster children and how accepted they had been into their previous foster care placements. A

focus was how comfortable the foster children had felt in comparison to birth children of the foster parents

(Butler, & Charles, 1999). An additional study illustrated that children that had higher resilience or higher adaptability were less prone to experience problems in a foster care placement (Flynn, 2004). All of these studies had what appeared to be valid ideals; however, each study was limited in the number of participants. Additionally, each study focused on a specific geographic area that may or may not represent the entire population of teenagers in foster care. These factors may have served to decrease validity.

The rural agency in this study is not exception to the national trends in placement disruptions. Older children are more frequently moved from placement to placement on a nationwide basis. Older children deserve a stable and safe living environment; however, they are not having this need met. Administrative staff and the MSW student recognize this lack of stability as a problem and determined to research based on the question: What factors contribute to the high number of foster care disruptions in teenage foster children?

Method

It was determined that the MSW student researcher would review files from two counties in the area being explored. The time allotted for completion of the project was limited to approximately three months, therefore it was determined that a small sample size would be utilized in this research. A large number would be difficult to process in a short amount of time and could potentially lead to more error in the research process. The research would be exploratory in nature, reviewing files of already existing data. Twenty cases from two counties social services offices were reviewed to determine the cause of the disruption. For the purposes

of this research, disruption was defined as any move of a child from a foster home that is not a return to the birth parent home or relative placement.

In order to meet criteria for review certain factors had to be present. The first factor of concern was that the child had experienced at least one disruption. The second factor is that the child must have experienced the disruption between the ages of thirteen to nineteen. The third factor is that the disruption could not have occurred before the year 2001. Finally, only disruptions from agency foster homes were reviewed. Placement disruptions in private foster care homes or residential placements were not reviewed for the purpose of this study. Cases that had experienced disruptions that met these criteria were identified by the supervisors of the two counties. The researcher collected twenty case names from these supervisors and reviewed each file. The researcher eliminated six cases because they did not meet the aforementioned criteria. Six additional case names were given to the researcher by the supervisors.

In order to review the case files the researcher reviewed and observed the case of each selected child that had experienced disruption in an effort to find certain information. There is no specific section that identifies the reason or reasons that a child has been moved from a foster home, hence requiring that the researcher review the entire file. No specific tool or instrumentation was utilized to gather this information. The researcher gathered a majority of information from contact notes and worker assessments to determine factors that attributed to the placement disruption. Also during the research process basic demographic information was gathered such as the sex and race of the teenage child. Research also documented the reasons that the children were initially removed from the homes of the birth parents.

This research is qualitative in nature. The research reviewed the information to determine causation and not to gather numerically based statistical information. The research was

conducted solely using information that had previously been collected for purposes other than the research. Because the materials gathered were previously compiled there were no independent or dependent variables. The researcher did not manipulate any variables. No specific tools were utilized to analyze or interpret the data. The information gathered was reviewed to determine factors that contributed to the placement disruption in order to report these factors.

Results/Findings:

As previously stated twenty case files were selected that met the above mentioned criteria. Those case files were reviewed in order to attempt to find the factors that attributed to placement disruptions of teenage children in foster care. As a part of this research, basic demographic information was also collected. Of the twenty cases that were reviewed there was an equal split of the sexes involved. The researcher reviewed the files of ten males and ten females. In relation to race, it was found that sixteen of the files reviewed were Caucasian, three were African American and one child was of Asian descent. In addition to these factors, the reason that the child was initially removed from the home of the birth parent was also document. It was determined that of the twenty children in the study two were removed due to sexual abuse concerns and one was removed due to physical abuse concerns. Nine children were removed for general neglect concerns including substance related neglect and the remaining eight were in custody because they were beyond parental control also known as a Status offenders. For a graphic demonstration of these reasons please refer to Appendix A attached at the end of this document.

The review process indicated that each child was unique. The children all had different family background and cultural concerns. Additionally, the circumstances of each child were

unique. Despite the uniqueness of each child, it was discovered that some children did have similar reasons that their placement disrupted. In order to maintain structure and provide clarity in reporting results the findings have been divided into different sections classified by the initial reason that the child was removed from the home of the birth parent home.

Research indicated that eight children were placed in foster care due to beyond parental control or Status concerns. Of these eight children, five were male and three were female. One child had a placement disrupt because of frequent flight and repeated incidents of running away. She was moved at the request of the foster parent when she was brought home by the police. They stated that they felt that her behaviors were beyond their control. Two of the status offenders disrupted because their status was altered to be considered as juvenile offenders and were remitted to the juvenile services division. One of these children sexually perpetrated against the biological child of a foster parent. The other child repeatedly committed acts of theft and vandalism. Three children experienced placement disruptions when they were transferred to mental health treatment facilities. One child was moved at the foster parents request due to unspecified behavior concerns and the last child disrupted due to her request to leave the foster home. She expressed that she and the foster parents had personal conflicts that could not be resolved.

The second category is the children that were initially removed from the home due to neglect related concerns. In this section, there were four females and five males. Three of these placements disrupted because the child was sent to a mental health treatment facility. Two children were removed from the same foster home because the foster parents alleged that the child would create lies about the foster parents and tell people in the community. One placement was disrupted because of general behavior concerns and being beyond the control of the foster

parents. This child also disrupted from his next placement before being placed in a therapeutic foster home. One child in this category disrupted because the foster parents were accused of using corporal punishment on the foster children in the home. An additional disruption that occurred because the child had been placed in the foster home on an emergency basis until a permanent placement could be located. The foster parents agreed to keep the child for the remainder of the weekend, but the child was left in the home until the foster parents requested the move. The last placement disrupted because the foster parents divorced and had to be re-certified as individuals before they could have foster children.

The last two categories have been combined due to the low number of children in these categories. Only one case that was reviewed where the child was removed for physical abuse concerns. This placement disrupted at the request of the child. The child was seventeen and opted to join an Independent Living Program rather than continue in foster care. The other category was sexual abuse. There were only two cases from this category. The first disruption occurred because the child was accused of sexually perpetrating against another child in the home. The second disrupted when the child was sent to a mental health treatment facility.

Discussion:

In reviewing the findings presented there were several factors that repeated among all of disruptions experienced by teenage children in foster care. These factors were the causes for the disruptions of these specific placements. These factors are representations of the cause for the disruptions of teenage children in foster care. It appears that the most common reason for disruption in the area studied is due to psychiatric concerns. Of the twenty children seven of them were moved from the foster home to a psychiatric treatment facility. It appeared that in

most cases the children were already receiving some manner of counseling on a limited basis before the placement disrupted. Others disrupted before the child had received counseling.

Behavior related concerns were a large percent of the cause that placements were disrupted. The term behavior is very broad. In this situation several case files documented “behavior” concerns, but many did not offer specific definitions of behavior concerns. Many of the disruptions can be attributed to specific behaviors of the child; however, five of the cases are specifically documented as the disruption occurred due to behavior concerns. In these situations, no further explanation was offered.

Other disruptions appeared to have occurred due to behaviors, but were listed with details that were more specific. Examples of this are the two children that sexually perpetrated against other children. These behaviors resulted in the child being removed from the foster home. Other examples include the two children that were accused of lying and the child that committed acts of vandalism.

It appears that many of the disruptions that occurred were completely beyond the control of the child involved. In one situation, the child was re-victimized while in the foster care system. In another situation, the family divorcing was not related to any contribution by the child. In other situations, the disruptions result at the request of the child. There were two disruptions in this research where the child was moved due to their own request.

From these findings, it may be concluded that these factors are causes for placement disruptions in teenage foster children. It may not be concluded that these are the only factors that contribute. This research was limited due to several factors. These limitations may prevent a high level of accuracy. Further this topic is very broad and there are an infinite number of influences on each individual and foster child. Due to the variety of influences, it would be

impossible to identify all causes for placement disruptions. What this research did illustrate is that despite diversity there are certain factors that appear to occur commonly that attribute to the disruption of teenage foster children. Such factors include psychiatric concerns and beyond control behaviors.

Potential solutions to address these common concerns could include more intensive counseling for foster children outside of hospital settings. Foster parents could participate in support groups or mentoring programs. These may provide assistance in obtaining parenting skills that are useful in managing the behaviors of teenagers. It further appears that open communication and communication skills are of vital importance when parenting and understanding teenagers in the foster home.

One limitation of this study is the time that was allotted for completion. The study was time limited, therefore the factors that were observed were limited as well. It is possible that more connections could be established if more factors were examined. A second limit to this research is that the geographic area that was studied was very limited. The researcher limited the research area to two counties. This concern is a nationwide concern; however, this research is deriving from two rural neighboring counties. A final limitation is that the sample size was very limited. In order for the research to complete the study in a timely manner the size of the research sample had to be limited. This research had a sample of only twenty disrupted cases. Increasing the sample size would increase the accuracy of the findings.

Conclusions and Recommendations

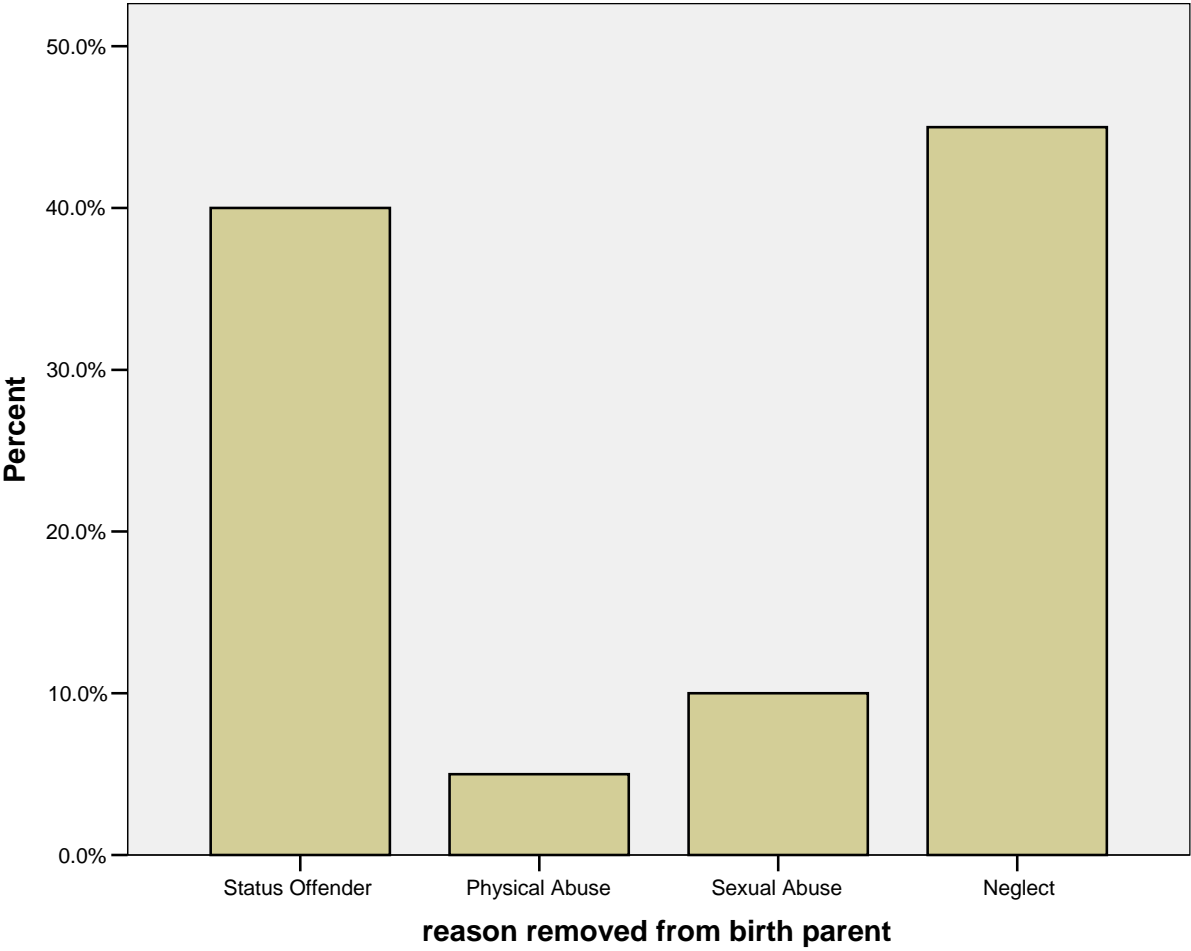
In summary, this research was very thorough to each case, but was not comprehensive to a large sample or area represented. From this limited sample, it appears psychiatric and behavior concerns are two common concerns that have led to previous disruptions in foster care

placements of teenagers. It appears that some placement disruptions could be prevented by offering more intensive counseling services to children in foster care. It further appears that group therapy or support groups may be of assistance to foster parents when confronted with issues relating to the care of teenage foster children.

This research did identify common concerns that led to disruptions in the area of the study. This could indicate that similar concerns occur on a nationwide scale. Persons that wish to conduct future studies on this topic should consider a wider geographic area of research. In addition, a larger sample would be beneficial in determining common causes for disruption. The larger sample would require more review and utilize more time; however, it may provide results that are more accurate.

References

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Results:

Cases that were reviewed experienced at least one placement disruption of a teenage child. In order to qualify for review the disruptions must have occurred after January, 2001.

Ages: Range from 13 to 19

Total Cases: 20

Sex: 10 Female and 10 Male

Race: 16 Caucasian 3 African American 1 Asian

Reason in OOHC/ reason child was initially removed from the home:

Sexual Abuse 2

Physical Abuse 1with neglect concerns

Neglect 9

Status/Beyond Parental Control 8

Children with more than 1 DCBS home disruption since 2001: 7

Causes for disruptions: Diverse and will be explained qualitatively in Project Evaluation Paper.